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Hay shortage has farmers weighing their options

By BOBBIE CURD
bcurd@amnews.com



Hay is brought in from another state before sales at the Boyle County Stockyards in Danville. (Clay Jackson photo)

As Boyle County Stockyards held its customer appreciation day during Monday's sales, Boyle and Lincoln County Cattlemen's Associations cooked burgers out front. But the talk among farmers was about hay instead of beef.

"I'm still on pasture this year, and I've not been able to find any locally," Frank Brown said.

Hay is usually abundant this time of year in roadside fields but has been a tough commodity to come by this summer due to dry conditions.

Several area farmers are considering importing hay, if things do not improve, to get through the winter months. Many wonder, though, if it is a cost-efficient option.

"I wouldn't be able to afford it," said Ron Patterson. Patterson said he's seen places locally that are charging up to \$45 a roll, compared to the normal price of \$15.

"But I'd sell my cows off earlier before paying that much for hay," Patterson said.

Normally, he would keep more than 100 rolls to get his herd through the winter, but this year will save only 52.

"This is the worst year for hay I've seen in my 68 years," said Darrell Ferrell. "What hay had been growing was killed, and I even seeded a lot and that's gone now, too."

Ferrell said he would buy hay from out of state and in fact already has. In 1988, he bought half a railcar worth but doesn't recall how much he paid for it.

"It can be better quality, too, because of irrigation and higher protein levels," Ferrell pointed out.



Wayne Russell, left, and Darrell Ferrell talk about the hay shortage in Kentucky on Monday at the Boyle County Stockyards. (Clay Jackson photo)

Hay from out of state

Allison Ramsey, an employee with the stockyards, is seeing more and more haulers bring hay in from out of state.

"Arizona, Oklahoma, you name it," Ramsey said. This year has been extremely tough on farmers, which means the winter could be even worse, or more expensive.

"We're seeing it run about \$225 to \$275 a ton," Ramsey said, which includes the hay plus the trucking cost. "I know Tarter Gate out of Liberty has been doing it"

Travis Cox, general manager of Tarter Gate, said the company has hauled hay in from other states for a while.

"I've seen the prices locally go up tremendously, so I guess everyone is feeling the effects of farmers trying to get hay any way they can," Cox said.

Bill Clary, spokesman for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, said the hay situation is a real problem. "We're facing a serious shortage, let's just put it that way."

Clary said the problem isn't just limited to Kentucky. It is affecting people across the entire country.

"We're seeing a lot of people compete, so the price is going up," Clary said. However, there has not been an actual crop loss significant enough for calling it a disaster area and asking for federal relief.

Complicated process

"But we will if we don't get any more rain over an amount of time," Clary said.

He said Ag Commissioner Richie Farmer has been talking to his counterparts in other southern states about taking the issue up with delegations and asking them to address this as extraordinary circumstances.

"Of course all that is in the earliest stages right now," Clary said. When the freeze hit farmers in April, Farmer asked the governor to work with the Department of Agriculture on the disaster declaration, and it was sent to the USDA in a couple of weeks.

"But it took a month and a half for them to reach a decision. It's a complicated process," Clary said.

Clary said he has heard different figures on what out-of-state hay would cost, the highest being \$63. "I've talked to farmers that are looking out of the upper Midwest and some of the plains states for help, but there's an economic problem with that," Clary said, adding that it's not viable for some farmers.

"We may not have a choice here shortly," Ferrell said, back at the stockyards. "If we run out of hay, then the winter months will be just as tough."

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